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N E W S L E T T E R

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A Day at the Last refuge of the Great Indian Bustard by S.Ashok Kumar IAS, C/o.H.No.10-3-283/5, Humayun Nagar, Hyderabad 500028: On 31st January, 1982 by 8.30 am Mr.Gopal Sen, Forest Range Officer, Wildlife, Flying Squad, Ajmer division and myself reached Sonkhlia village on our way to Madhopura - the last refuge of the Great Indian Bustard (Choriotis nigriceps). We travelled 40 kms in the station wagon criss-crossing the country track and cutting across the fields within the limits of Madhopura, Sokli, Sonkhlia and Loharwada villages for observing the GIB in its habitat.

The GIB conservation area of Sonkhlia, Ajmer Forest division, Rajasthan consisting of 17134 hectares is comprised of 12 revenue villages of Ajmer and Sarwar taluks. The terrain is plain with elevation ranging from 372 to 443 metres above MSL. In summer, the mercury touches 42°C while in winter it sometimes plunges to 2°C. Frost is fairly common during the winter season. The area is marked by low humidity receiving an annual rainfall of 400 mm with occasional winter showers known as "Mavata".

The area is dotted with trees which attain a height of not more than 4 metres. The common among them are Arunj (Acacia leucopholoea), Khejri (Prosopis cineraria), Babul (Acacia Nilotica), Pilu (Salvadora persica), Vilayati Babul (Prosopis chilensis), Dhok (Anogeissus pendula), Pipul (Ficus religiosa) Bar ficus bengalensis, Neem (Azadirachta indica), Siris (Albizzia lebek), Imli (Tamarindus indicus), and Khujur (Phoenix sylvestris).

The shrubbacious vegetation consists of Jharberi (Ziyphus numularis), Thore (Euphorbia caduciforlia), Dhatura (Datura), Aak (Calotropis procera), Khimp (Leptadenia phyrotechnica), Seniya (Crotolaria Burhia), and Andha Shishi (Xanthium strumarium).

Herbacious flora is limited to Dudhi (Euphorbia spp). Siyalbethana (Lepidagathis trinervis), Sankh pushi (Evolwulus alsinioides), Mundapath(Leucas hirta) and Sarithi (Becrhaavia).

The vegetation of the GIB conservation area is however dominated by various types of grasses such as Khas (Vetiveria zizanioides), Kaus (Saccharum spontaneum) Sawan(Echinochloa colonum), Dhaman (Cenchrus sctigerus), Bhurat (c. biflorus), Lapla (Aristida hystrix) and Lasiurus scindicus.

Since the habitat is devoid of forests, the only control exercised by the Forest Department is restricting hunting for ten years in the conservation area u/s 37 of the Indian Wildlife(Protection) Act, 1972 . Unlike Blackbuck and Chinkara, the GIB is not worshipped by the local Bishnoi community. However, being strict vegetarians, they help conserve the vanishing species of GIB.

Amidst the large cultivated tracts of Jowar, Bajra, Mustard, Groundnut and Bengalgram, are located six patobes of open shrub vegetation adjoining Loharwada, Jaswantpur, Madhopura, Sonkhlia, Rumsar and Sanod villages and it is in these patches that the GIB is often seen in small flocks, Sonkhlia village, 40 kms from Amjer on Amjer-Kota Road and its surroundings is perhaps the only potential pocket of GIBs in our country.

The GIB locally called the GODAWAN is an essentially ground bird and a fast runner for which it is equipped with cursorial feet. Being ponderous, it takes six successively long steps before it is airborne to a low height and glides down at the first opportunity. During the breeding season (May to September), the cock develops a pecular gular pouch in the throat and emits a deep moaning call audible up to 300 metres and hence it is called GUNJAN and HUKNA by the locals. Generally a shy and vigilant bird, it is not scared of cattle, cowherds and the noise of jeeps.

At Madhopura village, the wildlife watcher informed us that he had located a small group of GIBs the previous evening in the fields near the village. We therefore immediately headed for the site. After travelling 20 minutes, the watcher who had mounted on the station wagon, sighted 8 GIBs in a cultivated field. While we were cautiously approaching, they took to flight and within few minutes landed in a nearby field. As we were very anxious not to scare the birds, we followed a circuitous route and under the cover of an elevated earthern mound, stopped the vehicle and cautiously climbed the mound. Focussing my zenith binocular, I counted 5 males, 6 females and 4 young ones which was confirmed by the wildlife watcher. Walking sedately, the birds were searching out the insects, lizards and tender shoots. They were moving with a poise, and dignity of their own. When upright, the white neck and black crest are distinctly visible. The male birds, which are larger than the female birds, are generally wary and take to wing at the slightest suspicion. After watching them for full 30 minutes, we withdrew from the scene without disturbing the birds. It was a thrilling experience and a long cherished dream come true.

Mr.Gopal Sen informed me that the male bird measuring over a metre high weighs 14 kgs with a wing span of over 2 metres, while the female bird with a wing spread of less then a metre weighs 8 kgs. During his beats, he had witnessed two eggs being incubated by the GIB.

The conservation staff consisting of one Asst.Forester , two Wildlife watchers and one work-charged GIB watcher, under the supervision of Mr.Gopal Sen conduct census of the GIBs in

May-June when there are no crops and the water is so scarce. The following census figures indicate that the GIBs have atlast found a permanent niche in Rajasthan State.

Year	Number of birds
1980	37
1981	45
1982	53

With a devoted band of officers who are genuinely committed to the protection and preservation of the fast vanishing bird, it is hoped that the GIB, which once roamed the open flat grasslands of the Indian peninsula freely in huge flocks, will stage a comeback with vengenance. It is gratifying to note that the GIB has been declared as the State bird by the Rajasthan Government.

Small habitats of GIBs are also found in Karnataka (Raichur Dist.), Maharashtra (Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Aurangabad and Karnal Dists.), Gujarat (Jamnagar Dist.), Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh (Mahaboobnagar and Kurnool Dists.). In Rajasthan they are found in Kikaner, Barmer, Jaisalmer and parts of Jodhpur districts.

Few people realise that the GIB, one of the world's largest flying birds, is strictly endemic to the Indian sub continent and found nowhere else in the world. Victim of indiscriminate poaching and loser of natural habitat, it may disappear before our eyes in the same way as the Pinkheaded duck, Mountain Quail and the Jerdon's Courser. It is therefore imperative that special projects are taken up to study the ecology, breeding and population of the GIB and ways and means found to protect and preserve this spectacular bird in the several regions where it still exists.

Occurrence of Four Black Ibis (Psuedipis papillosa) in South India by R.Kannan C/o. 33, Saravana Street, T.Nagar, Madras 600 017: On 22nd of June 1982 I saw a Black Ibis on the roadside while on a drive from Mandapam camp to Tuticorin. The exact location lies about 2 km. south of the coastal hamlet of Kilakarai (Latitude 9.20 N). About 40 km. further South-West near Sayalkudi I saw three more Black Ibis walking along open grasslands quite far from water.

This is perhaps one of the very few records of the Bird occuring in Southern India. The range of the Black Ibis as stated in 'Book of Indian Birds', within our limits is 'The drier portions of the Indian Union (excepting the western sea board) south to Mysore'.